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Unfinished Narratives of Sparkian *Finishing School*

Closure as an Important Component in Making Sense

When the concept of the narrative is applied to works of art, especially literary art, rather than history, it is usually conceived as a teleological phenomenon. Its artistic design, which is always a question of form, implies a definite purpose that is aiming at, and therefore presupposing, some kind of closure. Even such classic examples of the postmodern open-ended novel as John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, with its proposition of alternative endings, does not really reject the sense of closure, but only makes it less definite. At the same time it becomes more demanding for the reader to get actively involved in the process of sense-making. A sense of leading to a closure, no matter whether it is with a linear or a spiral movement, or else along a zigzag path, is so deeply ingrained in the nature of narrative discourse in the novel that closures, and even post-modern vestiges of the traditional closure, are difficult to erase completely in the artefacts of fiction. It is so because closure, no matter what particular form and degree of completion it assumes as a key component of the narrative structure, is an important element in the process of constructing meaning in narrative texts. Consequently, it is fully justified to look upon the removal, or dissolution, of closure as a subversive strategy that will inevitably lead to deconstructing sense.

Subversion through Irony of the Teleological Character of Narrative Discourse

The aim of the following discussion is to look closer at how the erasure of closure, producing what has been referred to in the title as "unfinished narratives," is effected in the fiction of one of the most significant post-modern novelists, Muriel Spark. As my point of departure I have adopted the view that narrative, as a teleological activity spanned between two complementary

poles of the teller of the story and its recipient, must necessarily involve an attempt, decisive or hesitant, sometimes successful and at other times frustrated, to construct meaning. As emphasized by Wayne Booth and Linda Hutcheon, in their respective most comprehensive studies, among the strategies which foil endeavours to construct meaning the principal position should be assigned to irony which represents the greatest challenge to the well-established, and sanctioned by tradition, teleological paradigm of narrative discourse. It is the ironic mode, it seems, which in Muriel Spark's novels is most effective in removing or invalidating closures thus producing unfinished narratives which characterise most of her fiction, and at the same time it becomes a cornerstone of post-modern literature. The most explicit denial of the validity of closure can be found in *The Only Problem* (1984) that may be read as a novel about the impossibility of closing a discourse which assumes the form of a philosophical or theological inquiry, and where the reader is eventually informed, in a tone of accepted resignation, that "If the answers are valid then it is the questions which are all cock-eyed" (Spark 1985: 180).

Paradigms of Socratic Dialogue in Sparkian Fiction

Therefore it is not surprising that in Muriel Spark's novels the narrator often adopts a pose of the interrogating Socrates who, not without a good reason, is generally regarded as a master ironist. More importantly, it is the pose which belongs to Socrates, the doubter, who seems to mock, or maybe pity, his interlocutor's vain attempts to confer the finality of answers upon questions asked. Engaged in the truth-seeking dialogue with his disciple, the ironic mentor all the time undermines seemingly established meanings and defers *ad infinitum* the conclusiveness of a closure. Thus he shows reluctance to terminate their common pursuit and instead proposes ever growing uncertainty which inevitably leads to the blurring of clear-cut conclusions and to ultimate rejection of definite closures. Such Socratic dialogue, which has as its underlying principle the shunning of even provisional finality, is inscribed into the majority of Sparkian unfinished narratives, and it constitutes a characteristic feature of Muriel Spark's writing. But her affiliation with Socrates' ironic mode is most overtly acknowledged in her *Symposium* (1990) which not only through the title and the mottoes referring to Plato's and Lucian's *Symposiums*, but also by means of the setting of a convivial meeting, and the underpinning quasi-philosophical discussion, reflects, even if it is a distorted reflection, the paradigm of the Socratic debate.

The Finishing School as an Epitome of Muriel Spark's artistic creed

Without any doubt unfinished narratives constitute a distinctive feature of Muriel Spark's writing. However, if the lack of closure is taken as a probing critical instrument for the examination of Spark's novels, then it becomes evident that manifestly unfinished narratives prevail in her later fiction. Attempts and intimations of a closure, which still can be found in *The Comforters* (1957) or *Robinson* (1958) that belong to her earliest novels, are already missing in her late works of which *Aiding and Abetting* (2000) and *The Finishing School* (2004) are the best examples. In the title of my paper I refer specifically to *The Finishing School*, which is the last novel Muriel Spark got published before her death in April 2006, and I am doing it for two reasons. First of all I believe that *The Finishing School* can be seen as a testament left to the world of letters by the novelist who was giving her compelling testimony to the trends operative on the post-modern literary scene. Secondly, the very idea of the "finishing school," evoked in the title and elaborated throughout the novel, has a symbolic significance, and reflects a rupture at the heart of Sparkian narratives which on the one hand seem to tend towards a perfect completion, while on the other they demonstrate the mature novelist's awareness of the resistance of the material of art to various strategies of closure. The former, i.e. the drive of fictional discourse towards closure, is a prerogative of art imposing an aesthetic order upon existential chaos. The latter, i.e. the novel's refusal to go along with the closing tactics, results from the novelist's profound recognition of a complex relationship between artefacts of fiction and facts of life. The paradoxical nature of that rupture is best rendered by Muriel Spark's own words when she defines her aim as a novelist in terms of a commitment to the search of absolute truth through the form of the novel (see Kermode 1963) which has its limitations and is subject to various processes of relativization.

Tension between Opening and Closing as a Motive Power in Sparkian Post-modern Narrative

The Finishing School takes up the most representative themes of Spark's fiction, and like many of its predecessors, e.g. *The Comforters* (1957), *Loitering with Intent* (1981), *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1989), *Reality and Dreams* (1997), by introducing the motif of writing a book, it revolves around the tricky business of producing fiction, and makes disturbing allusions to confrontations and overlapping of imagined realities with the factual. It is a meditation in the

fictional mode on the subversive power of words and the prevarications of language employed to deal with the enigma of life, deviousness of human dealings and deficiency of social institutions. It is also an admission of the insufficiency of language, in general, and narrative discourse in particular, to grasp and render the inscrutability of divine universe and the complexity of human predicament.

The eponymous finishing school is "a place where parents dump their teen-age children after their schooldays and before their universities or their marriages or careers" (Spark 2005: 46). The "finishing school" is a significant element both in the structure of the novel and its thematic pattern. If two basic dimensions of time and space are applied here, it can be said that in terms of space "finishing school" represents a waiting hall, whereas in terms of time it corresponds to a preparatory phase which necessarily implies a sense of commencement. When at the level of certain abstraction both get combined into a spatio-temporal matrix where the Bakhtinian term chronotope may be implemented, then the finishing school can be perceived as a chronotope underpinning the post-modern discourse of the novel.

Paradoxically, throughout the entire narrative the idea of "finishing" school alludes to "getting started." Alan Kennedy speaks of such union of opposites as something particularly relevant for Muriel Spark's fiction, and he applies to it the term antisyzygy: "An antisyzygy is a union of opposites. It is not to be perceived as a fusion of contraries in which the two lose their identities and become one, but as an existing together of mutual exclusives. [...] Muriel Spark's work can be seen to be constantly striving to realise an antisyzygy" (Kennedy 1974: 152). Thus *The Finishing School* is the novel about getting ready to begin something or to launch a new phase in life: it may be writing a novel, publishing one, starting another relationship, or another career. However, looking here for a demarcation between what is vital and what is trivial turns out to be completely irrelevant as in the fictional world of Muriel Spark's novel all the evaluative distinctions and grades of significance, which derive either from ethics or from epistemology, are obliterated. The only differentiation which seems to matter belongs to the realm of ontology and it concerns the apparent separation between the beginning and the end. But even that proves to be illusory as no such separation is achieved in Sparkian post-modern novel.

If we take into consideration the criterion of teleology which, as previously postulated, is an important instrument in making sense, then the fundamental purpose of the "finishing school" and its most important *raison d'être* becomes "getting started." Such binary opposition and obvious discrepancy between

"finishing" and "getting started" generates irony which pervades the narrative discourse of Muriel Spark's work. In a similar way the name of the finishing school, "College Sunrise," combines the sense of an ending ("finishing") with the sense of a beginning ("sunrise"). Hence the finishing school, as a domain for perfecting and consequently closing, in its purely onomastic aspect, conveying the suggestion of the opening of a day, corresponds to the idea of getting started, with a clear foregrounding of getting started in the novelist's profession. In such a way the title that represents the *leitmotif* of the novel, becomes an illustration of the basic irony stemming from the divergence between language and reality which sustains the life of works of fiction, and which is the marshy territory where the novelist is continually compelled to walk.

Instability Inscribed into the Narrative and the Illusory Nature of Denouement

College Sunrise is an itinerant enterprise run by Rowland and Nina, a married couple at the beginning of the novel, who, however, get divorced as the narrative progresses. Thus the main protagonists, and the owners and managers of the finishing school testify to the lack of stability in personal liaisons and to endemic undermining of established social structures which is a pervasive motif in Sparkian fictive worlds, where human relationships are continually shifted and reshuffled. Rowland's and Nina's finishing school is an ultra democratic institution, "by its foundation, free and mobile" (Spark 2005: 117), resisting any form of authoritarian order, showing disregard for conventions and intolerant of any limitations. It cannot be confined to one place to the effect that the finishing school itself as an institution is getting started over and over again:

> After another year at Ouchy [Lousanne] he [Rowland] moved to Ravenna where the school specialised in the study of mosaics. From there he moved to Istanbul where he met with many problems too complicated to narrate here. (Spark 2005: 154)

Apart from Rowland, who teaches courses in creative writing, and is himself a frustrated writer, continually suffering from "writer's block" and "professional distractions" (Spark 2005: 42), another pivotal character in the novel is Chris, a seventeen-year-old College student and an aspiring novelist with assets of youth and talent to help him climb to success. Rowland simultaneously admires, envies and hates Chris; while the latter treats his mentor with youthful disrespect, often seasoned with arrogant superiority and condescension. Chris finds Rowland's presence and his instruction indispensable, for Rowland is

"part of his identity as a writer" (Spark 2005: 98). However, when it comes to the actual practice of novel-writing, the pupil completely ignores his teacher's professional advice. Rowland sticks to the Aristotelian principles of composition and believes that the novel should have a beginning, a middle and an end. Chris, who "seemed to have a built-in sense of narrative architecture and balance" (Spark 2005: 55), little cares about the classical order. Everything Rowland professes stands in striking contrast with Chris's creed of the creative writer whose guiding principles are manipulation of history and exercising absolute control over characters.

Rowland and Chris are tied to each other with the bond of mutual interdependence. Their relationship, which seems to be the motive power of the plot of the novel, is the record of rivalry and obsessive attraction devastating and sustaining them at the same time. "I can't work without you, Rowland. I need whatever it is you radiate. I have to finish my novel in peace" (Spark 2005: 93), says Chris. "I know I'm obsessed with Chris, but I want my obsession. So does he" (Spark 2005: 115), says Rowland. Contrary to what might be expected the story of their relationship does not represent either a growing awareness of the writer-protagonists or any interesting development of the craft of practising or aspiring novelists. Although Chris fictionalises history in his novel about Mary Queen of Scots and the murder of her husband, whereas Rowland sets out to record the actuality of experience in his book *The School Observed*, in fact they are both doing essentially the same thing; and eventually they both get their novels published. Without being definitely resolved, Rowland's and Chris's impassioned rivalry finds an impassive denouement in their getting engaged in a "same-sex Affirmation Ceremony" (Spark 2005: 155). The conclusion of their turbulent liaison, if that may be called a conclusion at all, is presented in the narrative as if it were a side track observation completely irrelevant from the perspective of the main story line. But then in view of such sham closure, the baffled reader is confronted with the question: what, if anything, is the main story?

Inconclusive Conclusion and Questions About Narrative Fiction in the 21st Century

The narrative discourse in *The Finishing School* deliberately arouses the reader's expectations in order to refuse to meet them. It starts a number of narrative tracs, but shows no intention to follow them till even a semblance of an end. In this respect the novel illustrates Rowland's precept for creative

writing according to which things that are left out matter more than those which are put in (see Spark 2005: 59). Similarly Sparkian fictional discourse counterpoints sounds and silences, and while hinting at a conclusion or closure, it nevertheless works with the potential of beginnings, and consequently capitalises on the unfinished quality of the narrative.

Contrary to the expectations which the title arouses Muriel Spark's *Finishing School* gives neither a sense of completion nor finality. Instead, with a thrust of irony, it launches the lives of the novel's characters onto a new course, after they have left College Sunrise, and after the same, and yet different, finishing school has restarted again at another place. Accordingly the novel closes with hints at new beginnings which open up for the whole gallery of College students and College friends and associates. Many of them belong to the margins of the narrative and have been barely touched upon in the discourse of Sparkian fiction. Thus the ending of the novel reads like an outline of a number of introductions to new story lines which are dormant and suspended in the narrative that is being wound up.

> Pallas Kapelas – her father had skipped bail, was wanted and always would be. Pallas married a merchant shipowner and was, so far, contented.
> Nina had not heard from Lionel Haas, not a word.
> Pansy Leghorn had a temporary job as an editor at the BBC.
> Princess Tilly had a baby girl who, as Isreael Bron had predicted, was nursed and coddled into Tilly's family, Tilly went her own way and became a society journalist.
> Albert visited his daughter from time to time, taking her a teddy bear and a bedside clock.
> Opal Gross was in the process of studying for the Anglican ministry.
> Mary Foot opened a shop in Cornwall where she sold ceramics and transparent scarves. She corresponded regularly with Rowland and Chris, passing on their news to Nina.
> Lisa Orlando got a place at Southampton University reading psychology.
> Joan Archer got a place in a good drama school, as she had for so long desired. Eventually she was to write television scripts.
> Albert was kept on at the house as a gardener, and Claire as a domestic helper.
> Elaine got a job in Geneva at the travel agency. She frequently met Albert at weekends and public holidays.
> Her sister, Célestine, had a job at the restaurant of a skating rink in Lausanne, where she also progressed wonderfully at skating. [...] (Spark 2005: 155–6)

There are many "good-byes" and "good-nights" (see Spark 2005: 110, 125) in the novel, and at the same time there are many hints at new courses of life

being open. In the closing scene of *The Finishing School*, Nina walking to the hotel listens to young voices reminiscent of College Sunrise which overlap with the voice of a speaker on Sky News. And appropriately the final words of the narrative are a fragment of the weather forecast: "As we go through this evening and into tonight . . ." (Spark 2005: 156). The narrative closes with three dots which function as true suspension points seemingly terminating the narrative discourse. And they acquire a special significance for they both prepare the ground for an illusion of an ending and simultaneously allude to everything that has not been said and which is the potential of a beginning.

With a curious twist of irony which, after D. C. Muecke may be termed as the philosophical irony of life, *The Finishing School* is Muriel Spark's last novel. It appropriately closes the writing career of one of the most accomplished British novelists who was leading the way from the 20th century modernism, through postmodernism, into yet unrealised potential of the 21st century. Interestingly, it closes the creative life of the novelist by putting in strong relief her unfinished narratives and thus positing an undefined status of narrative art in the times to come.

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